



**Testimony of Steven I. Aronin, MD**

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**Submitted to the Public Health Committee**

**HB 1128, AN ACT CONCERNING INFLUENZA IMMUNIZATIONS FOR HEALTH CARE  
EMPLOYEES**

**March 20, 2013**

To Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson and the distinguished members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Steven I. Aronin, MD. I am Chief of the Infectious Disease Section at Waterbury Hospital, where I have worked for the past 10 years with the goal of ensuring the safety and well-being of all patients who come through the hospital's doors for care and treatment.

I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 1128, An Act Concerning Influenza Immunizations for Health Care Employees.

In my capacity as a physician specializing in the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, I know first-hand the potentially devastating and debilitating impact that influenza and other infectious diseases can have on patients who are in the process of recovering from illness or actively undergoing medical treatment. Many of the patients in our hospital – as with hospitals anywhere – are in an extremely fragile state in terms of their health, and it is our obligation as health care providers to ensure that we do nothing to further impair their ability to recover. In fact, it is our duty and obligation to take any and all measures that will promote a safe environment in which the patient can recover.

With regard to influenza, the bulk of medical research conducted over the past several decades is conclusive that influenza is a highly contagious respiratory disease that is mainly spread from person to person and results in over 35,000 U.S. deaths annually. One of the main reasons we are unable to get the upper hand on this virus is that it frequently mutates or changes, therefore making previous infection and/or vaccination non-protective for future seasons. For healthy humans, influenza can be very debilitating, making it particularly difficult to carry out one's usual daily activities. Typical symptoms include fever, headache, cough, body aches and extreme fatigue. For hospitalized patients, however, the impact of influenza can be far worse, as the virus is typically infecting patients who are already sick and debilitated because of the original reason for their hospitalization. As has been noted frequently by health care organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control, it is not uncommon for influenza to contribute to the death of such vulnerable hospitalized patients.

With that in mind, Waterbury Hospital – along with numerous other acute care hospitals across the state – has taken pro-active steps to reduce the chances for influenza to spread to our patients. In addition to discouraging sick people from visiting the hospital and promoting basic infection prevention measures such as hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, over the past year the hospital has adopted a policy requiring all employees to receive an influenza vaccination on a yearly basis as part of their continued employment at the hospital. This step, which was implemented last year, has resulted in the vaccination of 100 percent of hospital staff, clinical and non-clinical. The hospital's overall support for this policy represents a deep commitment to the welfare of its patients, which is the core of its mission.

Extensive medical research has already shown that influenza vaccination is the single most effective preventive measure available against the flu. Since healthcare workers provide care to, and are in frequent contact with, patients at high risk for complications of the flu, it is logical that expanding influenza vaccine use among healthcare workers is a high national priority. There is abundant peer-reviewed and evidence-based research supporting this initiative, including research proving that vaccination of healthcare workers is correlated with decreased transmission and acquisition of influenza within the healthcare setting, decreased influenza-related morbidity and mortality, and decreased influenza-related illness and absenteeism among hospital employees. Yes, all of this is accomplished by simply promoting standard infection prevention techniques and by administering the flu shot to healthcare workers on an annual basis.

Unfortunately, there are many myths and misconceptions about the flu shot in terms of its efficacy and long-term side-effects. These myths have frightened some healthcare workers into thinking that the risk of the flu shot outweighs its potential benefits. This simply is not true. There is an overwhelming amount of definitive research showing that the flu shot is a safe and effective way to prevent influenza. The safety of the flu shot is highlighted by the fact that the CDC currently recommends that all Americans 6 months of age and older get the flu shot every year. Yes, all Americans – even the elderly, pregnant women and individuals with cancer and AIDS. This recommendation is because, for these high risk groups of patients, the potential benefit of getting the vaccine (i.e. prevention of respiratory failure and/or death due to influenza) far outweighs the small risk of having a bad side-effect from the vaccine itself.

At Waterbury Hospital, we found that education goes a long way. By educating our employees about influenza, as well as the risks and benefits of the influenza vaccine, we were able to administer over 2000 flu shots this year and achieve 100% compliance among clinical and non-clinical staff. We believe that our success will be replicated across the state once the proposed bill is passed, because the great majority of healthcare workers understand the moral and ethical obligation attached to their profession. Quite simply, we understand that we are expected to do all we can to heal, and to avoid harming, patients who have entrusted themselves to us. Thank you.